

'Kite Runner' is a high flier

And ATC will bring this beloved book to the Tucson stage

By Kathleen Allen

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"Come see me, Amir. There is a way to be good again."

The line, one of the first in Khaled Hosseini's "The Kite Runner," began a journey thick with family, friendship, betrayals, guilt, innocence, redemption and deep, deep love.

The novel topped best-sellers lists around the world, was a favorite among reading groups and scared David Ira Goldstein to death.

It wasn't the book that struck fear in his heart as much as directing the world premiere of the Matthew Spangler adaptation in San Jose, Calif., where Hosseini lives.

"People loved this book," said Goldstein. He is directing the Arizona premiere of the production, which Arizona Theatre Company opens in previews Thursday. "(Directing it) scared me witless."

Naturally, he accepted the challenge.

"I like to do something that's scary," he explained. "As an artist, complacency is your worst enemy, so it was great to take on something that had such great challenges."

"Kite Runner" was indeed a challenge — most of it takes place in Afghanistan, a country Goldstein knew little about. And there was that best-seller thing — when a book is as loved as this one was, readers are protective of the story.

But we're getting ahead of our tale here.

This reads like theater

Before Goldstein was ever presented with the possibility, Matthew Spangler was reading the book and was struck by its theatrical potential.

"It had a gripping narration, rich characters," said Spangler, sitting in the Temple of Music and Art theater during a rehearsal break. "The first-person narrative structure is a natural for the stage."

While it's a moving story, it's also a disturbing one. Spangler, who teaches adaptations for the stage at San Jose State, saw how Hosseini allowed for relief and realized how that could be translated to the stage.

"When you think about the themes — redemption, friendship, family, immigration, global politics — there's a lot in this book," said Spangler. "Something Khaled does is humor. There are lots of moments of humor that allow us to pull away from the darkness. The humor is like a palate cleanser."

Spangler had big challenges, too: The audio version of "Kite Runner" was 16 hours long. Boiling that down to 2 1/2 hours meant some big-time cutting. But that was a challenge that Hosseini made easier.

"The language is so rich," said Spangler, whose adaptation is faithful to the novel. "If the words are right, the audience will feel, and will fill in the gaps. That's the magic of theater — so much takes place in our imagination."

Once he finished writing, Spangler met Hosseini at a Starbucks to discuss the script. "He's so generous," said Spangler. "He said it was great."

Spangler directed the original development production with student actors at San Jose State. Spangler and Hosseini liked the results and decided to see if other theaters were interested. Enter San Jose Rep and Goldstein.

Love at first read

Goldstein was directing "Jekyll and Hyde" at San Jose Rep when the group's artistic director asked if he would be interested in directing "Kite Runner" there in the next season. After overcoming his initial fear, Goldstein met with Spangler. The two hit it off, Goldstein liked the script, and he knew that Spangler and Hosseini would be involved.

"It began a yearlong adventure, with lots of terrific research, spending time in the East Bay, watching kite fliers in Fremont (Calif.), meeting people," said Goldstein. "It's been a great journey."

Goldstein quickly saw what a powerful piece "Kite Runner" would be.

"The minute we got the story up on its feet, after about 10 days when we did a run-through, you knew this was going to work," he said. "This story has such power; it works in this form."

When it opened last spring, San Jose critics and audiences loved it. Goldstein wanted to bring it to Tucson, and once the rights were secured from Dreamworks — the company that holds the rights to the movie and book — for another production, it became ATC's season opener. All but two of the cast members are the same as in the San Jose Rep production.

A play for the ages?

It's a work that deserves a long life, those who have been involved with it agree. And not just because it's a good play with a universality to it. "I think the book and the play are well-positioned to counter stereotypes of Afghanistan culture and history," said Spangler. "Afghanistan is an extremely complicated country — there are different languages, different ethnic groups and the whole political scene. The play lays to rest certain stereotypes. Specifically, the play shows there was a strong middle class that believes in women's rights and education. The Taliban can't be equated with Afghan society, and you see that in this."

The play also addresses immigration, Spangler added.

"Not many American plays deal with immigration. There's a process of getting used to new language, people, culture. The book and play provide a greater understanding of Afghanistan and a greater empathy for the immigrants."

If you go

"The Kite Runner"

- Presented by: Arizona Theatre Company.
 - Playwright: Matthew Spangler, based on the book by Khaled Hosseini.
 - Director: David Ira Goldstein.
 - When: Previews are 7:30 p.m. Thursday, next Friday; 8 p.m. Sept. 12; 7 p.m. Sept. 13; and 7:30 p.m. Sept. 15-16. Opening is 7:30 p.m. Sept. 17. Continues through Oct. 3.
 - Where: Temple of Music and Art, 330 S. Scott Ave.
 - Tickets: \$26-\$50.
 - Reservations/information: 622-2823.
 - Running time: 2 1/2 hours.
 - Cast: Includes Barzin Akhavan, Thomas Fiscella, Gregor Paslawsky, James Saba, Rinabeth Apostol, Craig Piaget, Lowell Abellon.
- Contact reporter Kathleen Allen at kallen@azstarnet.com or 573-4128.*